

Year of success in training program

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Douglas Wells, a Project Iowa graduate working at Bridgestone Firestone, speaks during a news conference Wednesday at the Iowa Capitol. The first Project Iowa graduates have reached one year of employment. / Rodney White/The Register

About Project Iowa

- The program helps unemployed and underemployed workers in Polk, Story and Jasper counties get training as welders, certified production technicians and certified nursing assistants.

- More than half of the program participants are between the ages of 16 and 35, and a large majority are male.
- About 57 percent have a high school diploma or an equivalent and 22 percent have some college education.
- For more information on Project Iowa go to www.projectiowa.org.

Douglas Wells' path to a well-paying job with potential for advancement had a few bumps, but the 27-year-old credits perseverance and a publicly and privately funded training and mentoring program with helping him reach his goal.

Wells completed a welding course and has been working at the Bridgestone Firestone tire plant in Des Moines. For now he is driving a forklift, but he is sure there are opportunities for advancement. More important, this father of two young girls will be able to set an example.

"I just want to be successful at the end of the day," he said. "I feel like I'm successful but there's so much more that I can and will accomplish. I want my kids to know they had a great father who paved a better way for them."

Wells is one of 57 participants in the Project Iowa program who have completed job training and are working in or applying for decent-paying, full-time jobs that also provide benefits. All had been struggling with underemployment or unemployment.

Project Iowa is one of a few programs across the state addressing what Iowa officials say is an impending crisis: Iowa businesses struggle to find welders, certified production technicians, certified nursing assistants and other skilled positions. The gap is expected to grow as the economy improves.

Project Iowa officials said Wednesday that 83 percent of the participants who have completed job training in the first year of the program have found jobs. The remaining 17 percent continue to search for work.

The initiative was formed last year by AMOS (A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy), a nonprofit group led by local ministers and other religious leaders.

The program partners with local manufacturing and health care companies that are looking for skilled workers, said Julie Fugenschuh, the program's executive director. Many of the program graduates are placed in jobs with those companies. Partners include Mercy Medical Center, Vermeer Corp., ALMACO, EFCO, Quality Manufacturing, Eby Trailers and Bridgestone Firestone, among others.

Project Iowa provides Mercy with a pipeline of certified nursing assistant candidates, said Kevin Elsberry, director of human resources at Mercy.

Project Iowa plans to recruit and train more than 90 people this year.

Wells said he was struggling to find a career path when he applied to the program. He was ready to put a felony drug conviction and probation in the past. He had a two-year business degree from Des Moines Area Community College and wanted a career, not just a job.

He worked full time in the receiving department at Homemakers furniture store and trained to be a welder from 10:30 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. Some evenings he attended additional Project Iowa classes that helped develop initiative and perseverance. And in the thick of it all, his mother died of cancer.

The folks in the program were there for encouragement and to lean on, he said.

“They are my support system,” he said.

The program is supported with about \$550,000 in public and private donations, including a \$100,000 commitment from Gov. Terry Branstad and another \$100,000 that is part of the state budget set to be approved. Other funders include Central Iowa Works, The Annie E. Casey Foundation and individual donations.

On average, students completing the program get a job within six weeks of completion. Program officials screen applicants to ensure they have a home and some kind of job, both ingredients for success and not failure, Fugenschuh said.

“We’re a bridge,” she said. Project Iowa links newly trained workers seeking a living wage with employers seeking skilled workers, she said.